

To Britain's leader, Hub a model for antiviolence



When Prime Minister David Cameron told Parliament yesterday he would turn to Boston for lessons in quelling angry riots in London, he caused some head-scratching on this side of the pond.

Was he referring to the Boston Miracle of nearly 15 years ago? Or to the peaceful celebration that followed the Bruins' triumph this summer while angry fans took to the streets in Vancouver? Is any recent Boston unrest comparable to the London riots, where disenfranchised youths have seized on concerns about police violence to launch mayhem, burning storefronts and stealing flat-screen TVs?

Those involved in Boston's celebrated 1990s anticrime program were unsurprised, saying the London uprising points to a civil breakdown that demands a new strategy for community policing.

"Violence is deeply rooted in how people feel like they've been denied in society. It's more than just criminality," said the Rev. Jeffrey Brown, executive director of the Ten Point Coalition, a faith-based community group that works with young people and that partnered with government and law enforcement officials to reduce violence in Boston.

“There’s a level of frustration of how society is ignoring their voices,” Brown added. “When we talk about gang violence, it’s not just about territories or drugs. It’s also disconnected youth who also need their voices to be heard.”

“It’s not about the immediate unrest,” said David Kennedy, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and one of the architects of Operation Ceasefire, the anti-gang component of the Boston Miracle. “What the prime minister is saying is, we need a different way to address street violence and there is this existing successful model that we’re going to study.”

The Boston Miracle was the name given to the drop in homicides that occurred in Boston from 1997 to 2000 and was credited to a novel partnership between the community, clergy, and law enforcement. Operation Ceasefire, launched in 1996, offered gang members alternatives and threatened them with tough prosecution if they contributed to violence. The homicide rate plummeted over the decade, from a record 152 in 1990 to 31 in 1999.

The violent protests that have paralyzed London began peacefully last Saturday when residents gathered outside a police station in the northern London neighborhood of Tottenham to protest the police killing of a man named Mark Duggan. But the protests turned ugly and then spread to other cities as part of a campaign orchestrated using social media.

In an emergency meeting of Parliament yesterday, Cameron said the violence that erupted was not only about poverty - many young people in the riots have been voicing resentment about lost economic opportunity - but about a culture that glorifies violence. The prime minister called for more discipline in schools, actions to deal with disruptive families and a criminal justice system that clearly delineates right from wrong. In recent days, he said, some evidence has emerged that gangs were behind the coordinated attacks on police and the looting that followed the original protests.

“At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs,” he said.

“I want us to use the record of success against gangs of cities like Boston in the USA and Strathclyde in Scotland - who have done this by engaging the police, the voluntary sector, and local government,” Cameron said yesterday. “I want this to be a national priority.”

But not everyone agreed with such statements. Jack Levin, a Northeastern University professor of sociology and criminology, said that the prime minister seemed to be dismissing all the protesters as criminals, despite the fact that some began with legitimate grievances.

“The initial phase was actually not a riot at all. It was peaceful,” Levin said. “To characterize the entire group of protesters as criminals or gang members is really meant to remove the legitimacy of their grievances whether they use violence or protest in a peaceful way.”

Britain has often turned to Boston police for lessons in recent years, noted the British consul general in Boston. Paul Evans, who was Boston’s police commissioner from 1994 to 2003, caught the eye of former prime minister Tony Blair and after his tenure went to London to run the Police Standards Unit in Britain’s Home Office; he later focused on criminal reduction efforts. His predecessor here, William J. Bratton, has also advised police in Britain. Two years ago, Queen Elizabeth II awarded him the honorary title of Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

“Boston is a place that we Brits look so often for links, whether it’s in business or innovation or research. But also in this area of policing, it’s an area that we Brits have looked in the past,” said Phil Budden, the British consul-general in Boston.

In recent weeks, speculation has swirled that Bratton is a contender to become the new commissioner of Scotland Yard, following the resignation of Sir Paul Stephenson amid allegations that surfaced in the News of the World phone-hacking scandal that his officers had taken bribes. Bratton’s profile was further heightened when Cameron told Parliament last month that non-British candidates should be considered for the job, though Home Secretary Theresa May has declared that “applicants must be British citizens.”

In yesterday’s remarks to Parliament, the prime minister cited Bratton specifically, saying that he believes “we should be looking beyond our shores to learn the lessons from others who have faced similar problems. That is why I will be discussing how we can go further in getting to grips with gangs with people like Bill Bratton, former commissioner of police in New York and Los Angeles.”

Bratton, who is now chairman of Kroll, a risk consulting company headquartered in New York, has acknowledged his interest in the post but declined to comment on it when reached by phone yesterday.

However, he issued a statement responding to the prime minister’s remarks to Parliament.

“In light of the understandable interest of the British people and their government to address the issues of gangs and gang violence, if asked I would be honored to provide my counsel in any capacity they deem helpful,” Bratton said.

Bratton also said he would be in a position to discuss his work in reducing gang-related crime in Boston, New York, and Los Angeles, where police relations with diverse communities also improved.

“There are many lessons from these experiences that I believe are relevant to the current situation in England,” he said in his statement.

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